

Thirukkural and Society: A Timeless Ethical Framework for Contemporary Social, Educational, and Governance Values

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Abstract

In contrast, the Thirukkural composed by the Tamil sage Thiruvalluvar is one of the most comprehensive and profound ethical, social and behavioral manuals ever written by man. It is composed of 1,330 couplets, in which the author discusses the virtues (aram), material and political life (porul), and love (inbam), and offers a comprehensive moral philosophy that goes above and beyond time and culture. Today, Thirukkural continues to influence discussions on personal well-being, sustainability, governance and education, and is more than two millennia old. It examines its continued significance in contemporary society, highlighting its philosophical framework, civic ideals, and pedagogical flexibility. Thirukkural is a book that teaches readers the values of justice, compassion, moderation, and self-control, and provides timeless lessons for leadership, policy-making, and civic ethics. In conclusion, this study demonstrates the potential for a dynamic, new, and fresh interpretation of classical ethical wisdom to nurture integrity, social justice and sustainable human development in today's world.

Keywords: Thirukkural, Thiruvalluvar, Tamil Ethics, Moral Philosophy, Civic Virtue, Education, Governance, Sustainable Development, Mental Health.

Introduction

Thirukkural, an ancient book of ethics composed by the revered Tamil philosopher Thiruvalluvar, is one of the most acclaimed pieces in the world of ethical literature. It consists of 1,330 concise couplets which are organized into three main parts: virtue (aram), polity and wealth (porul), and love (inbam) and can be taken as a kind of manual of moral and civic life. The composition took place in the ancient state of Tamil Nadu, but the impact of it transcends its language and historical background. The Thirukkural remains relevant to contemporary readers, scholars, and policymakers, offering insights on topics such as education, governance, sustainability, and psychological health.

The 21st century has seen the return of the Thirukkural not only as a literary jewel but as a living framework of ethics to the research domain and institutions. Perspectives of Thirukkural towards Sustainable Development Goals and the Strategies to Achieve Sustainability (2023), shows the parallels of the Thirukkural ideas with many of the principles on the United Nations SDGs, particularly the ecological balance, social justice and inclusive human progress [1].

Likewise, in Thirukkural (2024), Thoughts of Nature interprets the text in terms of deep ecology and places emphasis on the moral duty of human beings towards nature [2].

Innovative methods of disseminating Thiruvalluvar's message to the next generations have also been studied by educational researchers. The research on Teaching Thirukkural to Form 2 Students using the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2025) showed that the application of the multimedia technique is able to increase students' involvement and understanding of classical texts [3]. Similarly, the study Teaching Thirukkural Through Memes to Malaysian Tamil Secondary School Students (2023) showed that the digital culture usage of pedagogy can help to make conventional moral education more relatable and effective. The practices presented show the flexibility of the text to the changing paradigms and technologies in education [4].

In recent scholarship, the Thirukkural has been an important text to consider in terms of moral authority and administrative ethics from a leadership and governance point of view. The article Thirukkural – A Veritable Treatise on Leadership Nostrums (2023) places it in a global leadership and ethical leadership conversation, highlighting its principles of justice, compassion, and accountability as enduring principles for effective governance [5]. The Language of Ancestral Wisdom: A Study on Interpretive Strategies in Thirukkural Commentaries (2025) is a parallel study that illustrates how the meanings of the Kural change over time and place, showing its rich interpretive possibilities and endurance as a philosophical text [6].

The institutional interest of Thirukkural is also increased significantly. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the government has implemented ethics education, which is based on the Thirukkural, as a compulsory component in schools from Classes VI to XII from 2025–2026 onwards [7]. Its couplets are used for readings and performances in weekly assemblies, with a conscious attempt to include ethical literacy in public education [8]. The move comes in the wake of the Madras High Court's earlier order highlighting that "meaningful engagement" with the Thirukkural, apart from it being incorporated in the textbooks, is important to develop moral understanding in the students. Furthermore, the government's initiative of rendering the Thirukkural into all major world languages demonstrates its universal significance and educational value [9].

These changes collectively represent a fundamental shift in how the Thirukkural is now perceived, transforming it not only from a repository of ancient Tamil wisdom but also as a player in the moral discourse of the present. The text connects the classical debates on ethics and social issues and offers a framework for governance, education, environmental responsibility and civic virtue. The aim of this paper is to understand the multi-dimensional impact of the Thirukkural in the present society in terms of its ethical framework, application in education and policy, and its ongoing influence on social welfare and governance. In the process, the essay shows how the Thirukkural is not only a monument of literary heritage but a living philosophy of human life in sustainable and ethical ways.

Thirukkural's Ethical Architecture and Social Philosophy

The Thirukkural is not merely a collection of aphorisms but a carefully structured ethical system. Its tripartite division - Aram, Porul, and Inbam - represents a comprehensive moral journey from individual virtue to societal order and emotional harmony.

The Threefold Structure Aram (Virtue)

The foundation of the Thirukkural rests on personal ethics. Thiruvalluvar begins with virtues such as truthfulness, self-control, hospitality, and non-violence [10]. For example, Kural 311 states:

சிறப்பீனும் செல்வம் பெறீனும் பிறர்க்குஇன்னா
செய்யாமை மாசற்றார் கோள். (குறள் 311)
(Sirappeenum Selvam Perinum Pirarkku
InnaaSeyyaamai Maasatraar Kol. – Kural 311)

Meaning: “Though one may gain great wealth and honour, those without blemish are they who do no wrong to another.” This teaching emphasizes that moral restraint and purity of conduct define true human worth, surpassing material success or honour. Thiruvalluvar warns that prosperity without virtue breeds moral decay and social discord. Genuine greatness lies in ethical self-discipline, where compassion, fairness, and responsibility guide action, transforming personal virtue into a foundation for collective harmony.

Porul (Polity/Wealth)

The second section, ‘Porul’, extends Thiruvalluvar’s moral vision from the individual to the collective domain. It offers guidance on governance, justice, economic conduct, and civic duty. Thiruvalluvar envisions political life as a moral extension of personal virtue, emphasizing that ethical rulers ensure social harmony and public welfare. His concept of rulership rests on righteousness (aram), wisdom (arivu), and benevolence (anbu), underscoring that prosperity and order can flourish only when power is guided by moral integrity [11, 12].

Kural 382 States

அஞ்சாமை ஈகை அறிவுக்கம் இந்நான்கும்
எஞ்சாமை வேந்தர்க் கியல்பு. (குறள் 382)
(Anjaamai Eekai Arivookkam Innaankum
Enjaamai Vendhark Kiyalpu – Kural 382)

Thiruvalluvar emphasizes that an ethical ruler must embody fearlessness (anjamai), charity (eegai), wisdom (arivu), and vigor (ookkam). Together, these virtues sustain just governance and public welfare. This aligns perfectly with the “Porul” theme that power must be exercised with moral integrity and rulership is a duty of service rather than domination.

Inbam (Love)

The third section, often misinterpreted as dealing solely with romantic love, actually explores emotional and relational ethics. It presents love as a dimension of human life interwoven with moral consciousness, demonstrating that affection and duty coexist within the broader moral order. This sequencing - virtue preceding wealth and love - underscores a central philosophical insight: a just society arises only when built upon the moral integrity of individuals [13,14].

Practical and Secular Orientation

Unlike many ancient texts that lean on religious authority, the Thirukkural adopts a secular, practical approach. Each couplet is concise, prescriptive, and behavior-oriented, offering ethical direction applicable to everyday life. Its teachings on honesty, gratitude, moderation, and fairness render it an adaptable resource for moral education and civic leadership in pluralistic societies.

Social Philosophy and Universal Ethics

The Thirukkural articulates a vision of universal human dignity. It extends moral agency across social hierarchies, treating all individuals - rulers, citizens, and commoners - as moral participants. Through its advocacy for truth, hospitality, non-violence, and justice, Thirukkural anticipates modern discourses on human rights, civic virtue, and ethical governance [15]. By linking individual virtue to societal welfare, the text anticipates modern ideas of civic virtue and ethical governance.

Kural 997 States

அரம்போலும் கூர்மைய ரேனும் மரம்போல்வர்

மக்கட்பண்பு இல்லா தவர்.

(குறள் 997)

(Arampolum Koormaiya Renum Marampolvar

Makkatpanpu Illaa Thavar – Kural 997)

“Though endowed with sharp intellect, those lacking human compassion are like lifeless wood.” This metaphor highlights that intellectual ability devoid of virtue leads to moral emptiness. Similarly, couplets extolling hospitality and justice reflect a moral order where ethics govern every sphere of life - from private behaviour to public leadership.

Social Justice, Governance and Public Ethics

The Thirukkural extends its ethical framework into the realm of governance, positioning moral leadership as the foundation of social order.

Governance and Moral Responsibility

In the ‘Porul’ section Thiruvalluvar classifies the responsibilities of rulers, ministers and administrators. Power is “justified only when it serves the public good,” he argues. The ruler is not a person of domination, he or she is a keeper of justice. This is in line with current democratic norms that emphasize accountability and leadership for service [16].

Kural 385 States:

இயற்றலும் ஈட்டலுங் காத்தலும் காத்த

வகுத்தலும் வல்ல தரசு.

(குறள் 385)

(Iyatralum Eettalung Kaaththalum Kaaththa

Vakuththalum Valla Tharasu. – Kural 385)

A true king is skilled in four duties: producing wealth, acquiring it, preserving it, and distributing it with justice. Thiruvalluvar portrays governance as a moral responsibility - rulers must generate and protect prosperity, but most importantly, use it for the welfare of the people. Power finds meaning only through justice and public good.

Social Justice and Civic Virtue

The Thirukkural envisions a society sustained by fairness, transparency, and civic responsibility. It condemns corruption, greed, and the misuse of authority - issues that remain deeply relevant today. Its ethical maxims can thus serve as foundational guidelines for public service training, corporate ethics programs, and civic education initiatives [17]. Scholars argue that these teachings can enrich anti-corruption campaigns and moral education curricula by grounding them in culturally resonant principles.

அறன்ஈனும் இன்பமும் ஈனும் திறனறிந்து

தீதின்றி வந்த பொருள்.

(குறள் 574)

Araneenum Inpamum Eenum Thirananarindhu

Theedhindri Vandha Porul. – (Kural 574)

Kural 754 States:

‘Virtue and joy both spring from wealth acquired without wrongdoing, through rightful effort and ability’. This verse encapsulates Thiruvalluvar’s social philosophy - that ethical conduct and just governance are inseparable from lasting prosperity. When leaders and citizens alike uphold moral integrity, society flourishes in harmony and collective well-being.

Policy Design and Institutional Ethics

Because of its brevity and clarity, the Thirukkural lends itself to policy adaptation. Its secular orientation and focus on human welfare allow policymakers to integrate its ethical vision into civic education, leadership development, and governance reforms. Conferences and comparative ethics forums increasingly position the Thirukkural alongside global moral traditions, such as Aristotelian virtue ethics and Confucian philosophy, to explore its universal relevance in guiding public morality.

Contemporary Implications

Modern governance frameworks can incorporate Thirukkural-based ethics in various ways -training civil servants on accountability, embedding moral reflection in policy design, and promoting civic virtue through education. In doing so, Thiruvalluvar's principles of justice and compassion can strengthen institutional trust and public integrity.

Social Welfare, Mental Health, and Contemporary Issues

Beyond governance, the Thirukkural addresses personal well-being and social health, offering guidance on self-control, moderation, and emotional resilience.

Self-Control and Mental Well-being

The virtue of self-control (aṭakkam) occupies a central place in Thiruvalluvar's moral system. Couplets 122–124 in the "Possession of Self-Control" chapter proclaim restraint as the highest form of wealth. Kural 129 observes that verbal harm can inflict wounds more lasting than physical injury- a sentiment echoing modern psychological insights into emotional trauma. Similarly, couplets on moderation in diet (942–947) parallel contemporary advice on healthy living and mindfulness. Scholars like Anuratha and Muniandy (2023) have argued that the Thirukkural provides a conceptual foundation for mental health education through its focus on balance, emotional regulation, and compassion [18].

தீயினாற் சுட்டபுண் உள்ளாரும் ஆறாதே

நாவினாற் சுட்ட வடு.

(குறள் 129)

(Theeyinaar Suttapun Ullaarum Aaraadhe

Naavinaar Sutta Vadu –

Kural 129)

The wound caused by fire may heal, but the scar left by harsh words never fades. Thiruvalluvar captures a timeless psychological truth - verbal and emotional injuries often outlast physical pain. This couplet emphasizes the ethical use of speech as part of self-control (aṭakkam) and compassion. It also resonates with modern understandings of emotional trauma and interpersonal ethics, reinforcing that true moral strength lies in the restraint of tongue and temper.

Kural 942 States:

மருந்தென வேண்டாவாம் யாக்கைக்கு அருந்தியது

அற்றது போற்றி உணின்.

(குறள் 942)

(Marundhena Ventaavaam Yaakkaikku Arundhiyadhu

Atradhu Potri Unin.

– Kural 942)

No medicine is needed for the body if one eats only after the previous meal has been properly digested and consumes food in moderation. Thiruvalluvar highlights balance and self-discipline in diet as the key to good health and longevity. The verse anticipates modern nutritional and medical wisdom - emphasizing mindful eating, portion control, and digestive awareness. It reflects his broader ethical philosophy that moderation (aṭakkam) and awareness in all aspects of life, including eating, contribute to physical well-being and mental equilibrium.

Addressing Social Vices

Chapters such as “Gambling” (931–939) caution against destructive habits that erode moral judgment and social stability. Thiruvalluvar likens gambling to a baited hook that ensnares the player- an apt metaphor for addiction and compulsive behaviour. These insights align closely with modern public health perspectives, suggesting that the Thirukkural can inform awareness campaigns against gambling, addiction, and consumerism. By integrating such moral teachings into civic and educational programs, societies can foster not only intellectual development but also psychological resilience and ethical maturity.

Kural 938 States

பொருள்கெடுத்துப் பொய்மேற் கொளிஇ அருள்கெடுத்து
அல்லல் உழப்பிக்கும் சூது. (குறள் 938)

Porul Ketuththup Poimer Koleei

AruketuththuAllal Uzhappikkum Soodhu. – (Kural 938)

“Gambling destroys one’s wealth, leads to falsehood, and deprives one of virtue, bringing endless suffering.”

Applications in Policy, Pedagogy, and Civic Life

In practical terms, the Thirukkural offers an ethical foundation for three major domains:

1. Education: Incorporating its couplets into moral education curricula can nurture critical ethical reasoning and character formation among students.

2. Governance: Its teachings on justice and duty can guide leadership training and anti-corruption initiatives.

3. Social Welfare: Its counsel on compassion, moderation, and self-control can inform community development and mental health advocacy.

Recent interdisciplinary initiatives linking the ‘Thirukkural’ with sustainable development demonstrate its versatility. It serves as a culturally rooted framework for ethical policy design and civic engagement.

Conclusion

The Thirukkural is still an active moral treasure - brief but apt, old but ever current. Its teachings continue to transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries, offering timeless guidance for ethical living and social responsibility. Thiruvalluvar’s philosophy of justice, compassion and self-discipline resonates with contemporary issues like good governance, educational reform, mental health awareness, and ecological balance, as seen in recent initiatives. The Thirukkural lives on not just because of its association with the Tamil culture, but because it is a world moral code. Originating in the universal principles, it reminds us that virtue cannot stand alone, it is inseparably linked with justice and social harmony. If societies integrate its teachings into their education, governance and community life, then they can develop the moral imagination for a sustainable and humane future. The Thirukkural serves as a bridge between the past and the present, offering guidance and wisdom for our present and future generations.

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